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Textile Terms Defined

A radio talk by Miss Ruth Van Deman, Bureau of Home Economics, delivered in the Department of Agriculture period of the National Farm and Home Hour, broadcast by a network of 48 associate NBC stations, Thursday, March 12, 1936.

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MR. SALISBURY: Miss Van Deman, before you start talking to the women of this audience, I have a question to ask you.

MISS VAN DEMAN: All right, hope I can answer it.

MR. SALISBURY: Well, the other day I saw an advertisement of pajamas in the paper that interested me. But it had some words in it I didn't understand. Wait a second, I've been carrying it around in my pocket to show you. Here it is. "Vat-dyed broadcloth pajamas". What does that mean - vat-dyed broadcloth?

MISS VAN DEMAN: You're positively psychic. Terms on textile labels are precisely what I want to talk about today. Margaret Hays of our textile division has just compiled a list of over a hundred definitions of the terms manufacturers are putting on the labels of their merchandise. These terms indicate quality, and if we consumers will just educate ourselves a little on the meaning of these words, we'll be in a better position to get our money's worth when we buy.

Take this one that puzzles you, Mr. Salisbury - vat-dyed broadcloth. You can be pretty sure that a fabric will hold its color if it's vat dyed. I've never been in a dye house myself where there are these great tanks of vat dyes. But the textile people have described them to me. It seems that a certain class of dyestuffs will not dissolve in water. So in order to get them fixed on cloth or yarn, these dyes have to be mixed with a chemical called a reducing agent. This changes the dye into a colorless substance, which will dissolve in water. It's this mixture of chemicals and dyestuff that is called a vat and gives these dyes their name. When the cloth first comes out of this kind of a dye it has no color at all. But the oxygen in the air gradually brings the color out. A regular chemical reaction takes place, and the dye is made right in among the fibers. This is one reason why vat-dyes are such fast colors.

Indigo is one of the colors that has to be applied in this way. I once heard about a workman who fell into a tank of the indigo solution. When he first gulled himself out he was wet but not blue. Then as the oxygen of the air got in its work, he became literally as "blue as indigo".

MR. SALISBURY: I hope he bleached out eventually; or maybe he joined the circus as the blue man. But going back to those pajamas, I take it that if I bought some of those blue vat-dyed pajamas they'd probably keep their color to the end.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes, they'd probably be blue to the last shred. And

(over)

remember this. A label that says vat-dyed means a lot more than a label that says "fast dye" or "fast color". Those are rather vague general terms, better than nothing at all to be sure, but they don't mean that the color will hold under all circumstances. It may be fast in the washtub but fade in the sun, or the other way around. A vat-dyed fabric will stand light and water and maybe even some of the bleaches used in laundering.

Then that word broadcloth you mentioned, Mr. Salisbury, that's come in for a lot of misinterpretation.

MR. SALISBURY: I was going to ask you about that. To me broadcloth used to mean my grandfather's cloth coat - very smooth and shiny and stiff as a board.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes, broadcloth used to mean something all wool and a yard wide - just about the finest kind of a wool fabric anybody could buy. But times and terms have changed. Now there's this soft cotton fabric called broadcloth, which is very popular for shirts and pajamas and women's sport dresses. Some manufacturers got into the way of labeling their goods "genuine broadcloth", implying that there were imitations.

Now of course there's no law of the land that says just what fabrics may be called broadcloth or voile, or calico, or anything else. These are merely names that have come into use over the years, and fabrics to which they are applied may vary considerably. Perhaps you've seen the words "combed broadcloth" on a label. This means that the cotton fibers have been combed out so that they're parallel before they are spun into yarn. Combed broadcloths usually are finely woven, with as many as 140 threads per inch in the warp. On the other hand a carded broadcloth is a coarser fabric. It often has less than 100 yarns per inch on the warp, and the cotton fibers have not been combed.

On at least one occasion this matter of the name on broadcloth was important enough to be the subject of a legal decision. The Federal Trade Commission ruled that the words "full-count broadcloth" should be used only in connection with a fabric having 144 yarns per inch in the warp, and 76 yarns per inch in the filling.

I've certainly learned a lot myself from Miss Hay's list of terms on textile labels. Some day I want to talk about the terms of hosiery - what it means when you see silk stockings advertised as 51 gauge 3 thread. What full-fashioned hose are as compared to seamless. And what ingrain and ringless mean on the labels of silk stockings.

MR. SALISBURY: That will be fine. These words are all Greek to me too.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Before I sign off today let me read you this message from a Farm and Home Hour friend in Tampa, Florida. It makes me feel that spring is really on the way. She writes: "It is perhaps a bit early for your annual arguments over strawberry shortcake up there, but they are being heard down here. Strawberries are not a luxury in Florida and we favor the biscuit variety of shortcake. But we have friends who either bake or buy most any kind of cake, except devil's food, and call it shortcake. Bah! You folks can make us laugh with you and that helps.

MR. SALISBURY: Well, I'm glad our annual strawberry festival adds to the gaiety of nations.